

## Mustard Seed reprises its touching musical, 'All Is Calm'



17 HOURS AGO • BY JUDITH NEWMARK JNEWMARK@POST-DISPATCH.COM 314-340-8243

Last season, Mustard Seed Theatre gave St. Louis theatergoers a beautiful present, “All Is Calm: The Christmas Troupe of 1914.” This year, like a favorite holiday recipe, it’s back, rich in sweetness and memories.

With the addition of just one song, this is last year’s show, unchanged. Under the same director and music director, Deanna Jent and Joe Schoen, the same performers — Charlie Barron, Shawn Bowers,

J. Samuel Davis, Gary Glasgow, Christopher Hickey, Jason Meyers, Antonio Rodriguez, Tim Schall, Luke Steingruby and Jeffrey Wright — cross Kyra Bishop’s bare set, evocatively shadowed by lighting designer Michael Sullivan. It represents the “no man’s land” between Allied and German troops in 1914, the start of World War I.

That year, something amazing happened. In a number of spots at the front, enemy troops put down their weapons on Christmas Eve. They shared treats like rum and tobacco, sang carols in various languages, even played soccer. Without their superiors’ approval, men on both sides decided that war could wait.

Writer Peter Rothstein tells that true story in “All Is Calm,” originally a concert. Jent and Schoen present it as a full play, rich in characters whom the actors portray in quick sketches drawn from letters, diaries and memoirs. Some of the most memorable include a British soldier (Glasgow) describing the death of his buddy, a tenor from the Paris opera (Rodriguez) giving a haunting rendition of “Minuit chretiens” (known in English as “O Holy Night”) and the German soldiers singing “O Tannenbaum” as they put up their little Christmas tree.

In fact, all the actors, dressed in old-fashioned khakis by costumer Jane Sullivan, invigorate the men they portray in scenes as brief as some of the soldiers’ lives turned out to be. They also give the folk tunes and period songs warm and thoughtful treatments.

Last year “All Is Calm” sold out, even with added performances, and in the spring it was honored with five St. Louis Theater Circle awards, including the award for outstanding production of a musical. It’s probably a good idea to buy tickets fast.

Not every show takes such pains. For example, “Boom Town,” at the West End Players Guild, opens with Stu (Carl Overly Jr.) and his wife, Angela (Beth Davis), talking about their banker,

Frank (Matt Hanify). They are trying to decide if he has started coloring his hair or wearing what Stu terms “a rug.”

But when he enters, Hanify is certainly not wearing a toupee. The color of his hair, such as it is, is not noticeable, either. Did director Peter Banholzer have his eyes shut? Or did he think the audience just wouldn't notice?

This carelessness compromises Banholzer's entire approach to the thriller, in which Frank has the money the couple needs to keep their store open, but Stu has Angela (sort of).

The playwright, actor Jeff Daniels, wants us to be aware of subtle shifts in power, but Banholzer cedes it all to Frank for most of the drama. When things aren't going his way, why doesn't he just walk out — with or without Angela? This kind of play depends on subtle, deadly menace; there's nothing subtle here. It's barely annoying.

## **If you go**

### **'All Is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914'**

**When** • Friday through Dec. 14; 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 and 5 p.m. Sundays

**Where** • Fontbonne University Fine Arts Theatre, 6800 Wydown Boulevard

**How much** • \$25-\$30; Thursday performances are “pay what you can” shows (canned food is welcome)

**More info** • 314-719-8060; mustardseedtheatre.com

### **'Boom Town'**

**When** • 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

**Where** • Union Avenue Christian Church, 733 Union Boulevard

**How much** • \$20

**More info** • 314-667-5686; westendplayers.org